

C'est qui le Patron- On The Way (EN)

Introduction: [00:11:20:06 – 00:11:35:18]

It's rather wonderful to remember that we have power through our purchasing decisions: we can change the world 100 times faster, and automatically, with no particular effort, by buying products that have positive influences and consequences on the environment, animal welfare, remuneration of producers, etc.

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Hello On The Way! I'm Nicolas Chabanne, founder of C'est qui le Patron, or "*Who's the Boss.*" I come from the south of France, and I still live next to Mont Ventoux. I mention my roots, because everything started from there. So, at school, lots of my friends were the children of strawberry producers, there are a lot of strawberries in Carpentras.

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And these people really had to work very hard so as to be able to feed themselves. That all seemed like a given. I saw my friends working at weekends, over the holidays. I saw parents who, whilst feeding other people, sometimes had problems getting by, and I thought that was really unfair. That was how I first joined a fraternity: the Carpentras Strawberry Fraternity.

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And they needed a spokesperson, someone who could explain to other people how producers needed protection so they could produce good, fair, and sustainable products. And that's how, after the Strawberry Fraternity, Le Petit Producteur came about. The idea was to put the producers' photos on products, and in exchange for 30% more compensation, the producers signed the products.

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When there's your photo and your family name, usually it's because you make good products. So there was a sort of exchange: in exchange for quality, people got paid better. It all started like that. And later on, I saw perfectly good strawberries, apricots, and peaches being thrown away because of small defects in their appearance.

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I thought that was a real shame. That's how Les Gueules Cassées, or Broken Faces, came about. And later on Les Gueules Cassées went international, after an article in the New York Times. The French ministry noticed the initiative, and little by little they approached us, asking: "So how could we help other producers?" and so from Le Petit Producteur and Les Gueules Cassées, we naturally came up with this venture.

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While it was me who sparked off the first embers of this venture called C'est qui le Patron, I always make sure to say that you have to forget that moment, because now there are 15 million of us who are buying, creating and checking products. And now I'm just the initiator,

who, like millions of others, is taking part in this great venture, designed to protect producers, the people who feed us, who deserve to be protected every day.

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There's a milk carton just next to me, and this milk carton came about in 2016, after a conversation with a minister's advisor. There was a presentation at the UN by Les Gueules Cassées, and the minister's advisor told me that there was a huge problem with milk producers not making a living from their work.

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Most of them were earning 300 euros while working seven days a week. It was so crazy that they couldn't make ends meet on their own. I asked how much extra it would add to a litre of milk so that they could make a living. 8 cents. 8 cents? And how many litres do people consume per year per inhabitant? 50 litres. That's when I thought, 4 euros a year, so that producers can earn a living?

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I thought I couldn't be the only person who'd pay the extra to make a difference, and that's how, after I had asked all the major brands to do it, and those major big brands had said "no", we decided to make our own consumer brand, and that milk came to store shelves in October, 2016.

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So it was from that discussion that we found out that it only takes tiny bit extra per litre for producers to get by. And so we decided to produce our own milk cartons. But as we didn't want it to be governed by marketing, a choice made by a few for everyone; there was Laurent Pasquier, who was part of our group of initial consumers, we've always been a group of consumers. Really, we're a consumer cooperative. The boss is a co-op. We all said "we're going to ask everyone. We'll see if group common sense can write us a set of specifications."

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It makes sense to ask ourselves questions and then answer them, as, in the end, we're the people who are buying it. And that's how the eight questions questionnaire came about. Do we leave the price paid to producers at the market rate? I remember Laurent Pasquier had the great idea of setting the price at 69 cents on the questionnaire.

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If people answered "yes", we'd leave it at the market rate. There was an important point: "producers don't earn a living, but the price doesn't change." Should we add 4 cents? That would pay their bills. Should we add 8 cents? Well, ok, yes. Each time, the answer was related to the price.

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We even added 2 cents so they could take a holiday. Then we decided that we wouldn't stop there. Should we remove GMOs from animal feed? 5 cents? Yes, ok. 1 cent for local cattle fodder. 1 to 3 months pasture grazing? 2 cents. Three to six months? 4 cents. So in fact we'd

taken back control, not over a product that was already on shop-shelves, which we knew very little about, or advertising that we might or might not use,

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we were writing a story that no longer needed to be told, as people already knew it. Which, I think, reassured a lot of people, as these answers, when you ask them again today as an online questionnaire, you get an answer that isn't far from the final answer that we all got, and which is something that goes beyond expertise, or marketing: creating simple things. So that's how our carton of milk came to cost 99 cents.

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But it wasn't an act of marketing, really it was the result of people's votes. And that's the absolute magic, we can't even explain it. Our dream was 5 to 7 million litres per year, to help our first producers. At the end of the first month, it was 1 million litres; at the end of the first year, it was 33 million litres; the second year, it was 66 million litres.

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There was no TV advertising, no salespeople in shops, just this kind of almost emotional motivation of people, saying "well, it's only costing me 4 euros per year, 30 cents per month, and I'm transforming a whole section of the world automatically via my act of purchase."

(sound interlude)

Once the specifications had been decided, we had a story that worked for us: no GMOs, French production, the milk was good, and the producers were happy. Ok, great, 99 cents.

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So then we went to Carrefour, who were a partner in our projects, notably with Les Gueules Cassées. And I was thinking only yesterday about that first meeting with Bertrand Swiderski, Jérôme Bédier, and I mention his name, Jérôme Bédier, because later on you'll see that it's incredible, what happened - so I said to them, "listen, we've got Les Gueules Cassées. We're your consumers, we're your customers. Please don't talk to us like we're a supplier. You have to make this milk carton 8 cents more. Help us out!"

At the same time, as if it were a in a film, when life imitates art, life knows how to write these stories.

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There were eighty families of producers in Ain, near Mâcon, who were in huge difficulty, represented by Martial Darbon. They could only survive economically for two more months. Their farms would have to close. They were being paid 20 cents per litre, they were losing 170 euros every day they operated the milking machine.

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Martial knew that at the end of his day, which started with milking at 6 a.m., with a second milking at 6 p.m., so 6 a.m. to 8 p.m., an entire week with no rest. 170 euros, 170 euros

...feeding other people. And so things were so bad that had to find an urgent solution. So they went to stores, and they brought leaflets saying, "This is our last chance to find a solution."

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And there was a lady at a store reception, who took their leaflet and, instead of throwing it away, as sadly people often do, she thought "This is terrible, these are people who also shop at our store, they're close to us." She took it to the director herself. The director took the leaflet. The leaflet was sent up to the regional management of Carrefour, and then all the way up to Jérôme Bédier and Bertrand Swiderski.

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And that was when the purchaser at that time, M. Delage, connected the two. The project of consumers wanting to help milk producers, and these producers who have seen their lives change.

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And the entire Carrefour team took part. 5,500 stores within one month.

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They told me that even their own brands couldn't achieve that. But the sentence which said "this milk pays its producer a fair price", that appealed to people. A consumer brand, not a shareholder brand. It was something different, and it motivated everyone. And that's how this carton came to store shelves.

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So I was talking about Jérôme Bédier, because at the time I felt like he was doing something other than just making a decision as the boss of Carrefour. There was something very human about him, and I tucked that away at the back of my mind. They asked us from the first year to become members of the cooperative. You might think that was maybe just to keep us happy.

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But no. Three years later, we were having one of our regular meetings. And, at the end, a few questions. Three first names: Sylvie, Thierry and Jérôme. I gave the floor to Jérôme, the member who was last in line to ask a question. I recognised Jérôme Bédier's voice.

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I said to him "are you Jérôme Bédier, the ex-boss of Carrefour?" And he said "yes, I am", and he was at the meeting, giving his opinion, like the rest of us. And then I realised that something significant had happened.

(sound interlude)

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So it was an extraordinary pleasure for us, as consumers, to have been able, with the help of distributors, of partners, and a dairy in Saint-Denis-de-l'Hôtel that took the milk, that collected

it... It was a truly lovely story, that happened rather astonishingly easily. There was a bit of destiny, which helped a little.

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And that allowed the first 80 families to be saved, who, without it, thought they would no longer be around.

(sound interlude)

That blue carton has become the best-selling milk in France, which was unimaginable, as there were no TV adverts, no salespeople in stores. Consumers creating a milk for solidarity, one that isn't the cheapest, and it became the best-seller, ahead of all the other milks.

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But when you become number one in sales, you also send a clear signal to all the other brands. Look at the specifications, and notably the remuneration of producers. This is also maybe something that helps sell the product. And so all the other milks started raising their prices.

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People aren't being paid at 2016 prices or the equivalent anymore. Today, we, the consumers, having created this carton of milk, which has become the best-selling milk in France, because it gave the highest remuneration for producers, it automatically raised the producers' remuneration from all the other dairies upwards. When you buy this carton of milk, beyond the producers, automatically, you transmit an impetus with all that hard-earned cash, that means there's a cascade of impacts that can be measured and controlled, in terms of feedback about environmental impact and animal welfare.

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It's rather wonderful to remember that we have power through our purchasing decisions: we can change the world 100 times faster, and automatically, with no particular effort, by buying products that have positive influences and consequences on the environment, animal welfare, remuneration of producers, etc.

So, we need to be able to identify them. And in fact, we realised something, which is that this carton of milk, when you really know its history, when you know that you can go and verify each point in the specifications, you can go and see the milk factory, or go see the producer in person - we do visits all year round. The consumer-members, not our team. Anyone can go visit, and we invite everyone to do that. When you have that sort of guarantee, people want to buy it. Ultimately, the big issue for all of us is transparency. I mean that, for example, you visit a store today.

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How many products guarantee that when you buy them, you can trace every cent? Are you sure that your money is being used for something positive, that the consequences of buying it aren't doing more harm than good to the environment? How many products give you that guarantee? The answer is zero! Manufacturers may not have really understood that this isn't a constraint.

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It's not intrusive. Show us another product that's not from C'est qui le Patron that truly spreads value, helps producers, and protects the environment. People would buy it in large numbers, that it would be a success - we're seeing this - which means that a slightly more transparent company would have been right to do it, and wouldn't lose out. So that's our message.

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We don't want to keep being a success story. We don't want to be the Coca-Cola of milk or the food industry. We just want to be consumers, as we're a co-op, as there are no dividends paid at the end of the year, we have no financial interest, we don't have investment funds that need us to get results. We let things happen, based on our group common sense, our goodwill, and that allows us to create some great ventures, and for others to be inspired by them.

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Once again, it's consumers expressing themselves, not some business manager who wants to take sole credit for a success. We're no longer in a time when success can only happen by being unique compared to others. Equity has an advantage, which is that it adds to equity: one fair approach adds to another fair approach. There's no competition between two virtuous approaches.

(sound interlude)

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So, if you want to help a venture like this, how can you get involved? So first there's the act of buying products, because that's the key to everything. Then, if you're able to, you can become a member of the cooperative. There are 15 million customers, but there are also 13,000 member-ambassadors, who are sort of co-initiators of our success, on a day-to-day basis, and who go into stores, who talk to department managers, who organise activities. Stores had never seen this before. Events where there's the milk producer speaking with the customer who's a lady that the manager sees once per month in their store.

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It's clear that something significant is happening. And so, by being a member, you take part in regular votes, everything is decided collectively. And then you can take part in much more direct workshops, attend meetings where we decide on the conditions that we present to producers so as to make sure that their lives improve, so that they aren't under so much pressure.

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It's marvelous to see this every day, whatever your level in the process, to be a small brick in this rather spontaneous edifice, something that's now even seen at an international level as something that's rather incredible. And then there's all the articles, like in The Guardian, recently: in other countries people can't believe that consumers have been able to do this in France.

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And when you're a member, you're doing something very important: you're a member-consumer. You personally go to make sure that every point in the specifications is a reality. There's Bureau Veritas, which is an official body, which does that via other means. But what we like is when members say: "We're off to Dijon tomorrow, to such and such a factory, that makes such and such a product. Who wants to come?"

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The first ten sign-ups don't know each other. Sometimes there are top names, big brands. That happens a bit, but it's not an audition. And if I were to come and I thought that in fact, C'est qui le Patron was a little bit odd, it's not what I imagined, I'd be on social networks to criticise it right away.

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So this total permeability was the key to the success of our story, because you say, ok, I'm bringing in money, but I know that if it weren't me, then there would be other people like me on the inside, watching and checking.

There's a nice story about Michel-Edouard Leclerc, who wanted to know whether this was truly the venture we were talking about, before he put all our products on his shelves.

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And so one day he told me, don't say anything, I'm going to come on a member visit one morning. And he came along. Nobody knew he was coming, and he was able to ask questions. Are you actually real consumers? You aren't being paid? You don't know each other or Nicolas Chabanne? No, no. When he realised it was all true, he decided, ok, it's a real consumer venture, and that's how he accelerated putting our products in all of the Leclerc stores.

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Today the question most often asked, despite the immense success of our approach is: where can you find these products? Because it's crazy that, although we sell 100 million products every year, not every store stocks our products yet. Because as we don't have a sales team; there are some people who are sensitive to consumer expectations and they put our products on their shelves.

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But there are a lot of people who don't know about us. Not every store does it. But for that we have a brilliant, simple, and useful tool: an app. You download it, you click on the store. It comes up with a message: everything's done for you: "Hello, I'm a customer at your store. I'd like you to stock these products. They help out producers. I would buy them. And then I'd tell other people that you stock them."

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You press a button, and that message gets sent to the manager of the store. So these are tools that we use on a daily basis to try and help as many families as possible. There were families of producers 1,300,000 in France in 1950. And there are 395,000 left. In the last 10 years, 100,000 have vanished. 27 farms go out of business every day, so 200 per week.

(sound interlude)

There have been a lot of articles written overseas about a funny sort of phenomenon in France, a consumer brand that helps producers. And there are consumers in eight other countries who wanted to reproduce our initiative, who, with the same goal, with the same motivation, created products that aren't necessarily milk.

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They're different products, so there are flagship products, like milk, and organic butter, and then there's a wider family that now covers 20 products, as many are apple juice producers, who came forward, saying, you do milk, but we need an extra 9 cents per kilo of apples, we're cutting down our orchards just because we're lacking 9 cents. My goodness! How many litres of apple juice do people drink every year? I think we need to add 52 cents per year for a French apple producer to earn a living, via in person sales. So this is how we created an apple juice. This apple juice is now served on trains, with a lovely little venture, as the SNCF called us saying "we'd like to stock this at all our outlets." There's always a sort of magic, as we're a consumer venture, because there's no business-to-business relationship, we get an incredible amount of help, so thank you to everyone, to so many partners and actors. And that's how 20 products are now available in every store. We were missing Franprix, who came to offer us an even more incredible partnership: to replace their Franprix organic milk cartons with the C'est qui le Patron milk cartons. And that's a very strong symbol, and it helps organic producers enormously, and it's impressive because it shows to what extent this desire, as a consumer citizen, you can sometimes think that life's a bit out of your hands, and it's other people who are in control. But still, you need to bear something in mind, which is that we have all the money of the world economy in our pockets at the start of the year. I mean that on 1st January, when you start your day, altogether we all have in our pockets the 1,600 billion euros that are going to be spent over that year.

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If we don't get together, then we end up floundering in a sea of adverts and marketing. But if, at some point, in a somewhat utopian world, if we gathered up all that money and said ok, we'll spend it on products and with companies that pay their employees properly, that care about the environment... Then the world would automatically improve. So the solution is in our own pockets.

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We need to get together, talk to each other, and coordinate actions of this type which, on a major scale, can really, truly change things. But what would be wonderful, and would happen more quickly, would be if a lot of people were inspired by it. It's very striking to see that after seven years, there hasn't been a second C'est qui le Patron.

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They should exist for every sector of activity. You can see that it actually works. So it's clear that it's a question of mindset that, ultimately, it can't accommodate this idea that consumers might have a bit more of a say upstream of when products arrive on the market. So there are a few issues that need to be worked out. When you're a marketing expert in your sector, it's very hard to accept that consumers might be able to answer a question, and maybe they'll

come up with a useful solution, when normally you're the one that should know better than everybody else.

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There are lots of little hurdles like this, that will be overcome, because anyway it's urgent. I tend to think that we're all looking for hopeful future, where value is shared a bit differently as opposed to just an assurance that products won't harm our health, the environment or producers.

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I think everyone more or less agrees with that. So it's a question of time. People need to realise, we all need to realise, that we have absolute power through our purchasing decisions. And there's a magic there, that I mentioned earlier, that goes beyond the rational framework. When you realise that it's hard to explain selling 100 million products, when you don't have an organisation, a strategy, or even a business plan.

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We didn't have any of those things. And in fact there's this murmuration effect, which might explain it, since I have the role of trying to explain it all, notably to the press. And a member told me that they found it hard to explain how and why we've achieved this level of sales. And they said I should maybe look at something in the animal world, called murmuration.

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So what's murmuration? I didn't know what it was. So, for example, it's those immense flocks of starlings that circle in the sky in their thousands, in a sort of perfect scroll shape. And scientists proved that there's no one single leading bird, giving impetus to the group. There's a sort of collective intelligence that takes hold of the group and makes them do it, a group intelligence, where no individual could have made the whole group do what they do.

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So maybe there's a bit of that in C'est qui le Patron? An irrational element that guides the story, and a sort of extra bit of soul, a magic, meaning that when you push a venture like this at your own level, this force unfurls that could never be organised by a company or a structure, that would have wanted to over-think it and manage it.

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But I love this idea behind C'est qui le Patron, and its development, which is that you can change things and the world for the better 100 times faster, by having an influence and trying to inspire other companies, rather than by waiting for them to do it at the scale that we do.

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And it's true. And so that's how we made ourselves completely permeable. We respond to every request. Over 100 companies have come to us, asking us: how do you do it? My goodness, we'd love to be inspired by that. The problem is, that with the best will in the world, when you're a manufacturer or a private brand, and you decide to imitate C'est qui le Patron,

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the problem is that it doesn't work like that. It's not about you being at 30% CSR, and now you're at 87%; you're at 150% or you're not doing CSR. It's because direct consumers don't feel what you're trying to do. So it's not a point of pride. We're still the only one, and that's great. No. That's a problem.

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We need a lot more other companies to adopt this approach.

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An entrepreneur who will say: tomorrow I'm starting a venture, where I think that by the end of the year, on the strength of the consumer energy coming back to me, I'll take 50% of my profits and I'll put them back into a system where consumers, via the co-op, will reinvest them elsewhere.

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Well they'd never lose out. If we'd have been traditional entrepreneurs, and we'd explained to everyone that we were making a new brand of milk, we would have sold 2 million litres of milk every year. Because we did something much more collectively, we sold 100 million. So, an entrepreneur who might be inspired by this approach, even if it's not 100% redistribution like we do, but rather 50%, well consumers, naturally, would rather buy that product, where at least some money returns in a virtuous circle, to help the rest of the world.

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So I find it hard to understand, because it's a win-win, including for entrepreneurs. Why don't they take more inspiration from a model like this for a different sort of future? How is the world going to be in better shape than it is today? If, at some point, two things happen: we, the people who consume, we step up, and we use a treasure much more valuable than all those millions of euros, which are also getting harder to find, even worldwide;

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There's a more valuable treasure than money, and that's our available time. The fact that, if, at some point, we get together to tackle an issue, we can change things right now. If tomorrow we all decided to pick up all the rubbish on the streets of France, then we'd be the cleanest country in the world in 24 hours.

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After that, between that reality 24 hours later and today, there are other things, and we need a bit of patience.

(sound interlude)

To this question of a sort of formula or invitation to do things, I think it's very much individual. First of all we have to accept the fact that we're not perfect. There are lots of things about my own convictions that I don't yet do anything about, for sure, to the extent of how things should be, but you have to accept that.

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You can't go and hide. And then there's one very simple thing, that again we all have in our pockets, and even if we don't earn much money, a little piece of the immense ocean that flows into our lives, called the economic world. There's nothing, not a 30-story building, not a pen on the desk of a great president, there's nothing that isn't purchased, at some point, from someone, perhaps with much less money, in some corner of our country or the world.

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That money is our collective property. We don't talk about grand policies, that would be inappropriate, but let's just realise the phenomenal power that we have by purchasing a product which has a positive consequence on the world around us, and which, in a virtuous effect, if we use a simple image, if tomorrow we buy from a company that pays its employees properly, which itself buys from companies that pays their employees properly... at some point that value will come back to us, that we have decided to trace by framing it.

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So there's a lot of hope in the idea that we shouldn't wait around for a mindset to come along that's a bit different, with the collective common sense and goodwill that we all have, solutions with a good chance of being implemented. The proof is there, but there are many other great adventures to be had, through a little bit of exchange and discussion.

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So let's be very much aware of the absolute power that we have, and most of all, let's enjoy the pleasure of exerting it, every day, even for just one single product.